THE GOD WHO CALLS
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JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 4
Genesis 11:30–12:4
Mark 1:16–20

"Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country.
. . . So Abram went."
Genesis 12:1, 4 (NRSV)

"Jesus said: 'Follow me.'"
Mark 1:16 (NRSV)

What I found was what I had already half seen
or less than half, in many ways. . . .
Something in me recoils from using such language,
but I am left with no other way of saying it
than what I found was Christ. Or was found.
It hardly seems to matter which.

Frederick Buechner
The Sacred Journey

A priceless moment happened during worship a few weeks ago. It was the second Sunday of the month, and we were celebrating the Sacrament of Baptism. It is always one of the great moments in the life of this church: beautiful babies, dressed in baptismal finery, sometimes wearing dresses their older sisters or brothers or sometimes their parents wore for their baptism years before; often entire families are present in the front pews, literally beaming, particularly grandparents for whom, I know from experience, it is a profound and moving occasion. It is charming and lovely, and it is also an eloquent acting out of one of our deepest beliefs: that God loves us unconditionally long before we can begin to understand that, if we ever really do. Long before we have a moral track record, God loves us. And when water is poured, or sprinkled—less messy for fastidious Presbyterians (there are those beautiful dresses, after all, and sometimes even a lace bonnet to contend with)—when water is poured or sprinkled on a tiny head, a child becomes part of the church, the congregation, but beyond that, the

holy catholic church, universal, global, the communion of saints, stretching all the way back in time. All that is going on in Baptism. And then there are the infants and children themselves, the stars of the show—from our perspective at least—although they don't do much by way of active participation. When they do get into the act, congregations love it: when they fuss or cry or grab the minister's glasses or microphone or these Geneva tabs, which must appear like something handy to hold on to. Toddlers present unique challenges and opportunities. Sometimes they look around and decide they want none of it and announce, definitively, "No thank you, I'm not going there."

The priceless moment occurred several weeks ago when parents presented their two-year-old son for baptism. He was fine with the whole thing, didn't fuss or cry or refuse. In fact he seemed perfectly comfortable when I took him in my arms, seemed almost to be concentrating on what was happening, didn't flinch when I touched his head with water. And when I said, "Christopher, you are a child of God, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever," he looked me in the eye and said, clearly and articulately, "Uh-oh."

Well, yes. "Uh-oh." That's not a bad response to "You belong to Jesus Christ forever." If that's in any way true, who knows what might happen?

In recent weeks we've been thinking about what the Bible says about God. Several recent popular, best-selling books make the case for atheism, the belief that there is no God. The authors are also unhappy with and critical of religion and the way religion has been associated with violence and with efforts to stymie and discredit scientific inquiry, all the way from the papacy forcing Galileo to recant to current efforts to stop stem cell research and to counter the teaching of evolution in public schools by requiring a pseudo-science called creationism be included in the curriculum. The authors indentify extreme and bizarre examples of religion to prove that religion is toxic and dangerous, and, of course, there are plenty of examples to choose from: suicide bombers in Pakistan killing innocent civilians in the name of God; al-Qaeda terrorists killing fifty-eight Christians during mass in a Baghdad cathedral last week; and churches for Middle East Peace reporting Jewish settler violence against Palestinians has risen sharply recently. The truth is that thoughtful Christians, Jews, and Muslims don't believe in the god the neo-atheists don't believe in and deplore the use of religion to support violence or anyone's social and political agenda.

So what does the Bible say, and what do we believe, about God? This morning we consider a unique and important part of the Christian and Jewish idea of God, the God who calls.

The one question I have been asked over the years, a question every clergy person I suspect is asked, is “How did you get into this business? How did you decide to become a minister?” People are curious, and beneath the question, I think, is an assumption that each one of us had some singular experience in which God spoke and told us what to do with the rest of our lives. A similar assumption is that clergy are the only people who have these experiences, so everybody else is free to do whatever they want to do with their lives.

Call is a central theme in the Bible, a fundamental concept for Christians and Jews, and it begins with a story in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of the book of Genesis, the story of Abraham and Sarah.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis—creation, the garden, Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, the flood, the tower of Babel, the generations of descendants—are what scholars call pre-history, and it is a mistake to try to make them be historical, literal. But now the Bible takes a major turn. This is a story that is historical. Historians and biblical scholars have access to it. It takes place in time and place that we know about. A man by the name of Terah, a member of a Semitic nomadic tribe, sets out with his entire family, including his son Abraham and Abraham’s wife, Sarah, and all their flocks and belongings, sets out from somewhere in modern Iraq, heading east toward Canaan, modern Palestine and Israel. For some reason the mission is abandoned. Terah and entourage settle instead in Haran. The family builds houses for themselves. They are settled. After a long life, Terah dies, and now the real story begins.

God, “the Lord,” the same one who created, now speaks to Abraham: “Go. Pick up and go from your home, your father’s house, take up the journey and go to the land I will show you.” And then God makes an absolutely remarkable promise, given the fact that Abraham and Sarah have no children and are getting along in years—he is seventy-five: “I will give you descendants who will become a great nation.” If the command to go is bracing and challenging, the promise is ridiculous. This family is at a dead end. There will be no more children. Nevertheless, old Abraham and Sarah listen to the voice, pick up and leave the settled security of home, the

orderly, predictable, safe life they have established, and head out into the future without knowing exactly where they are headed, only that God wants them to go, that God will be with them on this journey wherever it ends.

There are two very important ideas here: one, that God not only creates life and gets involved in human affairs, but God calls, summons people to a journey whose destination will be home. Two, that faith, biblical faith, is the act of following—it's not so much believing ideas about God, but trusting God and letting go of security, safety, routine; it's about setting out to follow.

Abraham and Sarah are examples of what it means to be faithful, to have faith in the Bible, not because of their purity or morality (in fact Abraham will show himself to be something of a lying coward when he tries to pawn his wife off on pharaoh to save his own skin, but that's another story). They are people of faith because they trust God and follow.

Does God call? Let's think carefully about what is not here. It's pretty open actually. Abraham is not told where he's going, and he's not told what to do when he gets there, wherever it is. There are no particulars, just the invitation, the command to trust and follow.

It's when we start demanding particulars that we get into trouble. The *Christian Century* ran an article recently by an evangelical scholar, Philip Cary, who teaches at Eastern University. "No Secret Plans" elicited a flood of letters to the editor. God doesn't give detailed instructions, Cary wrote. His students assume that God has a complete plan for their lives and they need to discover what it is. The plan includes what school to attend, what vocation to choose, what courses to take, whom to marry, where to live, what color car to buy. It creates terrible anxiety, Cary says. That's not in the Bible. The Bible wants us to make wise, faithful decisions. God wants us to be responsible managers of our own lives, and that means making lots of important decisions. Don't pray for God to tell you what to do, Cary tells his students; pray for the wisdom to make right decisions for yourself. The most the Bible says about it are these words: "He has told you what is good and what does the Lord require? 'Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.'"

And Jesus? "Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself" and, of course, "Come, follow me."

David Brooks wrote an editorial for the *New York Times* last summer, "The Summoned Self" (2 August 2010), in which he cited a commencement address by distinguished Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christenson. Christenson told the graduates that when he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford he decided to spend an hour a day reading, thinking, and praying about why God put him on the earth. It was hard, but he stuck with it, and ultimately, he says, "figured out the purpose of his life at the age of twenty-three."

Brooks offered an alternative, which sounded biblical to me: the summoned life. "Life isn't a project to be completed; it's a landscape to be explored." You must be able to respond to life situations as they come, asking "What is this situation summoning me to do?"

It's a different approach from having it all figured out: a responsiveness, a willingness to embrace a call when it comes; not a decision made once, but a lifelong journey of responding to God's call, God's summons.

Barbara Brown Taylor explores the topic thoughtfully. She can't explain it, but she was drawn to God as a child and young woman. She liked movies with religious themes—*Spartacus, Lilies of the Field.* She loved *The Flying Nun.* "I could not walk by a hurt thing without hurting myself," she writes (*Leaving Church*, pp.22–24). When she announced that she was going to seminary, her mother turned from doing dishes at the kitchen sink and said, "You *will* get over this."

She struggled with vocation in seminary, surrounded by students who seemed to know exactly when, where, and how God had called them. Every night she retreated to a rusty fire escape outside her dormitory room to think and pray, and one night she says God spoke to her: "God finally answered what was I supposed to do with my life? God said, 'Anything that pleases you. . . . Do anything that pleases you and belong to me'" (pp.109–110).

She reflects, "At one level, that answer was no help at all. The ball was back in my court again, where God had left me all kinds of room to lob it wherever I wanted." It was also a great relief: "God had suggested an overall purpose but was not going to supply the particulars for me. If I was

going to live a life of meaning, then I was going to have to apply the purpose for myself" (p. 110).

One of the great ideas that came out of the Protestant Reformation was the "priesthood of all believers" and its corollary that "no vocation is dearer to God than any other" (Taylor). That is to say you can embrace God's summons to live a faithful life as a minister but also as a school teacher, a doctor, lawyer, a laborer, a homemaker. You can embrace God's summons to a journey of faith as a parent, a volunteer, a Little League coach. Embracing God's call does not always mean going to seminary and becoming a minister. In fact, mostly it doesn't. You can embrace God's call to be faithful where you are in life, doing what you have to do to provide for yourself and your family.

How did I decided to be a minister instead of something else, people still ask me. The answer, to be truthful, is entirely prosaic and not at all dramatic or startling, no voices in the dark, no sudden flashes of light, not even a good dream. I was somehow drawn to it—drawn to God, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, and try as I might to ignore it or find better vocational options, I could not. When my presbytery asked that question before voting on whether to ordain me, I had the misfortune to be appearing with a young man who knew exactly when God called him to ministry; God told him what seminary to attend and what kind of minister to be. I mean no critique, but I had no such clarity. The best I could come up with was something like "It's an itch I can't seem to scratch. It's a place I have to go before I decide anything else and it sounds pretty interesting to me." I'm not sure why, but they decided that was enough, and they voted me in.

I love those spare, lean accounts at the beginning of each of the Gospels when Jesus calls his disciples. There's not much there. We wish for more: were James and John and Peter frustrated with where they were in life, impatient for adventure? Had Jesus checked their references and SAT scores before calling them? All we know is that they weren't praying in the synagogue when it happened or on a silent discernment retreat. They were fishing, busy at the hard work of their trade. "Follow me," he said, and immediately they dropped their nets and followed him. It also doesn't tell us the rest of the story fully. Were they full-time disciples? I doubt it. I don't think they spent every minute of every day walking around Galilee with him. I think they kept working; maybe he did too. I think that their discipleship, their following Jesus, happened in the context of their work; that they

figured out how to be faithful to him as they did what they needed to do, just as you and I do.

Barbara Brown Taylor, whose journey of faith has now led her out of professional ministry as an Episcopal priest and into college teaching, writes, “Everybody wants to be good for something.” David Brooks concluded about the summoned life, “Life comes to a point not when the individual project is complete but when the self dissolves into a larger purpose.”

That summons comes not once, but along the way of life’s journey. It comes many times—where we work, where we play, where we live and love. Follow me. Belong to me. Be my woman, my man, in all you do today.

Abraham and Sarah back on the edge of recorded history: “Go.” Peter, James and John at their nets beside the Sea of Galilee, working: “Come. Follow me.” Dear little Christopher was exactly right: “You belong to Jesus Christ forever”; “Uh-oh.” The fact is you don’t know where it will lead.

What we do know is that when we embrace the summons we are never alone. The one who called us promises to travel with us and never let us go.

All praise to him.